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# Fascist Politics and Italian Art: Collection of Essays by UD Professor Shows How Mussolini Made Italian Art His Own

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Feb. 9, 2005  
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## NEWS RELEASE

### FASCIST POLITICS AND ITALIAN ART: COLLECTION OF ESSAYS BY UD PROFESSOR SHOWS HOW MUSSOLINI MADE ITALIAN ART HIS OWN

DAYTON, Ohio — All rulers and regimes from antiquity to the present have made persuasive political use of the visual arts, and Benito Mussolini and Fascist Italy were particularly adept at this age-old practice, according to an art historian at the University of Dayton.

Cornell University Press has just released *Donatello Among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy*, co-edited by Roger Crum, associate professor of art history at the University of Dayton, and Claudia Lazzaro, art historian at Cornell University.

The richly illustrated book examines how Mussolini and his regime frequently referenced and manipulated examples of Italian art history in the combined political and visual culture of Fascist Italy between 1922 and 1943. Drawing on the art of ancient Rome, Medieval and Renaissance Italy, the period of 19th-century Italian unification, and even contemporary futurist art, Mussolini and the Fascists "laid claim to and, in some respects, fundamentally changed how we see and understand the history of Italian art," assert Crum and Lazzaro.

The book's 16 essays examine "every aspect of visual culture — from monumental architecture, sculpture, paintings and gardens to exhibitions, films, medals, household items and stamps — (that) helped link (Italy's) past with modernity," according to a description from Cornell University Press.

Scholars are praising the book's originality. "This highly stimulating, coherent and original volume of essays superbly illuminates many ways in which (Mussolini's) Fascist regime used different aspects of the past in its attempts to manufacture and promote an integrated and intrinsically modern national identity for Italy," writes Christopher Duggan, author of *Fascism and the Mafia* and *A Concise History of Italy*.

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Crum and Lazzaro came largely by accident to their mutual interests in the artistic propaganda of Fascist Italy. Trained as historians of Italian Renaissance art, the co-editors both discovered in the course of other research how deeply Mussolini and the Fascists had become entangled in the art of the much more distant past.

Lazzaro, a specialist in Renaissance garden design, developed an understanding how many Renaissance gardens had actually been restored and reworked during the Fascist period.

Crum's own moment of scholarly redirection came in the summer of 1996. While working in Florence on the political meaning of Renaissance architecture, he chanced upon records and imagery made in preparation for Adolf Hitler's visit to Italy in 1938. "In a funny sense," Crum notes, "Mussolini, Hitler, and the Fascists made me a 'Renaissance Man,' but not necessarily the scholar of Italian Renaissance art I was trained to be.

"All works of art have different, accumulative 'lives' over time," says Crum, who's currently co-editing a new book, *Florence: The Dynamics of Space in the Renaissance City*. "Certainly, once the art of the past has been used by a modern dictator, it becomes very difficult, and at times impossible, to see that art in the same way again. Indeed, the art changes forever on a certain interpretive level."

*Donatello Among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy* is available through Amazon.com and other booksellers for \$57.50 (hardback) or \$24.95 (paperback).

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